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AUTHOR McCanne, Lynn P. F.
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ABSTRACT

Seventy-nine members of several types of groups responded to questionnaires which detailed their goals and self-perceptions, and their expectations and perceptions of group leadership, norms, methods, and atmosphere. The questionnaires were administered near the beginning and again at the end (posttest N=69) of the group experience. The groups themselves were university counseling center therapy groups, beginning and continuing group process laboratory classes, and a sensitivity training microlaboratory. Separate factor analyses were computed for responses to each questionnaire, and the resulting factors identified interpretable dimensions of goals, selfperceptions, leadership, norms, methods, and atmosphere. Members of physically separate and ostensibly different groups were in fact found to differ along the dimensions identified, and an empirical characterization of each of the four groups was developed from the major differences along those dimensions. (Author)

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Empirically Characterizing Groups: Differences in Member Goals, Expectations, and Perceptions

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Lynn P. Fisher McCanne
University Health Service
Northern Illinois University

Increasing numbers of groups in counseling, psychotherapy, and other growth experiences have been accompanied by a corresponding increase in group process research. In the past, this research has been largely anecdotal, but recently there have been more systematic approaches (e.g., Lieberman, Yalom, & Miles, 1973). However, there has been little systematic inquiry into what group members expect from groups, whether they get what they expect, or whether expectations and perceptions differ across groups. The present study dealt with participant goals and self-perception, and with expectations and perceptions of group leadership, norms, methods, and atmosphere.

METHODS

Participants were 79 students at a large midwestern state university who voluntarily (1) came to the university counseling center and joined any of the therapy groups conducted by the staff there (N=26); (2) chose to continue in the second term of an ongoing group process laboratory, a clinical psychology undergraduate course offered by two advanced graduate students in that field (N=7); (3) chose to begin a new group process laboratory led by the same graduate students (N=13); or (4) chose to participate in an all-day "microlaboratory" introduction to sensitivity training, offered

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by the same and other graduate students (N=33).

The study examined differences in member goals, self-perceptions, group leadership, norms, methods, and atmosphere across the four types of groups. Participants answered pretest questionnaires between their first and second group meetings or after an introductory exercise in the microlab. They then took part in their six-to-ten week groups or the one-day microlab. Posttest measures (N=69) were taken within three weeks of termination or following the microlab at the end of the day. Each questionnaire was given at both pre- and posttesting. The questionnaires were either adapted from other studies of groups and individuals (primarily the Lieberman et al., 1973 study) or developed as the result of a pilot study of previous counseling center group members.

The first group meetings, microlab exercise, or the questionnaires themselves may have influenced the goals and expectations participants then had for the group experience. Therefore, the term "pretest" was used merely to designate the time of the initial testing, not to suggest any "pure" pregroup condition unaffected by contact with the group. The study did not attempt to determine where goals and expectations originated, only to examine them at the time of the initial testing and to compare them and later perceptions across groups.

In order to determine the interrelationships of pretest variables, separate factor analyses were computed for each questionnaire. The resulting clusters of items identified separate dimensions underlying each scale and the important variables on each dimension.

Analyses of variance and Newman-Keuls tests then compared groups on those dimensions of pretest and posttest goals, expectations, and perceptions, and also on general expectation and satisfaction. Chi square tests were applied to the binary data on the Group Atmosphere scale.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several underlying dimensions were identified for each questionmaire. The seven dimensions of goals were general change, academic-vocational counseling, counseling readiness, nurturance, abstract self-direction, presentation of self in social situations, and self-awareness. The dimensions of self-perception (as measured by two separate questionnaires) were general positive versus negative attitude, feelings of worthwhileness, feelings of uselessness, self-esteem, pride, self-assurance versus self-effacement, risk-taking versus uneasy stability, submissive dependency, personal adjustment versus aggression, nurturant affiliation, and self-discipline versus lability.

Underlying the scale of group leadership were dimensions of strength and distance, personable truth-giving, personal attraction versus teaching, and resource leader. Norms were distrubuted along six dimensions: Intense expression versus open boundary, self-centeredness, aggressive leadership, passive dissatisfaction, influence attempts, and cautious involvement. There were five dimensions of group methods: Expressive involvement, hope for change, risk-taking, feedback, and getting answers. The four dimensions of group atmosphere were involvement, support, negative experience, and defensiveness.

The questionnaires were useful in differentiating the four types of groups. At both pre-and posttesting, differences were found on many, though not all of the items and factors.

Therapy Group: Members of the Therapy Group wanted and achieved more self-awareness goals, but wanted and achieved fewer presentation-of-self goals. On the counseling-readiness dimension, the members of the Therapy Group wanted and achieved more of the positively-related goals and fewer of the negatively-related ("new and entertaining experience") goals. These group members were emphasizing work on themselves, concern about changing themselves. They were relatively uninterested in pleasing others, encountering new experiences, and being entertained. They were concerned with "serious work."

Therapy Group members expected and reported less useful experience with a strength-and-distance style of leadership, but did expect and experience as useful the personable truth-giving styles. They wanted and got closer relationships with their group leaders, who were perceived as providing solutions.

Members of the Therapy Group expected and judged the norm of intense expression as more appropriate, and the open boundary items as less appropriate. They expected and reported opposition to influence attempts. Expressing emotions, keeping "group business" inside the group, and not trying to manipulate the group were important group norms.

Therapy Group members expected and reported more useful experience with all five dimensions of group methods: Feedback, getting answers, risk-taking, hope for change, and expressive involvement.

Apparently, all were relatively appropriate for a self-development group such as the Therapy Group.

Therapy Group members tended to show the lowest posttest general positive attitude toward themselves of all four groups. They indicated both pre-and posttest perceptions of themselves as more submissively dependent, less risk-taking, and more aggressive. At posttesting, they perceived themselves as more labile than self-disciplined. They also reported themselves, at both pre-and post-testing, to be lower on a nurturant affiliation dimension. These individuals had originally come to the counseling center wanting some kind of help, and the self-perception data confirmed that they saw themselves somewhat negatively and were concerned with self-change.

Of the four groups, Therapy Group members perceived their leaders to be most effective (and tended to expect that), but reported the least satisfaction with their group experiences. They tended to value the experience and want to recommend it more than members of other groups. Apparently, therapy group members did not get what they wanted, but viewed the group leaders and the whole experience as valuable.

Only the Therapy Group stood out on items of group atmosphere. They found the atmosphere more negative and less involving. They had expected more involvement initially, and may have been disappointed.

Continuing Lab: The only goal dimension on which Continuing Lab members were different from the other groups was self-awareness, on which they wanted and achieved fewer goals. This seemed consistent

with the fact that this group was not structured as a self-growth group, as was the Therapy Group, but rather as a more academic learning experience.

Continuing Lab members expected and reported less useful experience with the leadership types which loaded positively on a personable truth-giving dimension, but expected and experienced as useful those styles which loaded negatively on the dimension, contrary to the Therapy Group. Members of the Continuing Lab expected and experienced less of the personal attraction styles and more of the teaching styles as useful. They experienced as more useful the resource leader style. Expectation and perception of teaching and resource styles were consistent with the academic and self-study nature of the group.

In the area of norms, Continuing Lab members expected intense expression to be less appropriate and open boundaries more appropriate, contrary to the Therapy Group. They also approved passive dissatisfaction and influence attempts, the latter opposed by the Therapy Group. For this group, there was generally less emphasis on emotional expression and more on learning from both passive and active group change efforts.

Members of the Continuing Lab expected and reported as less useful all the group methods described. The group methods described were evidently not very relevant to this academically-oriented group.

Continuing Lab members tended to show the highest general positive attitude toward themselves, at posttesting. They also tended, both pre-and posttest, to have the highest feelings of worthwhileness.

This helped explain the lack of interest they expressed in self-change goals. On the more specific self-perception dimensions, members of the Continuing Lab reported at both pre-and posttesting that they were less submissively dependent, more risk-taking, and more personally adjusted. They were more self-disciplined than labile. These self-perceptions, appeared consistent with this group of individuals, none of whom were seeking help for personal change purposes but rather were expecting or looking for an academic, intellectual growth experience.

New Lab: Members of the New Lab, like the Continuing Lab, also differentiated themselves from other groups on only one goal dimension. They wanted and achieved less on the self-awareness dimension, as did the Continuing Lab.

At posttesting, New Lab members judged as less appropriate a norm of intense expression and as more appropriate open boundaries, again similar to the Continuing Lab. They were more approving of self-centeredness and aggressive leadership, but disapproved of passive dissatisfaction, unlike the Continuing Lab. This academic group would appear to approve of more active behaviors than did the Continuing Lab members.

New Lab members, like the Continuing Lab, expected and reported as less useful experiences with all methods described. This scale described group methods which did not seem applicable to the academically-oriented New Lab.

At pretesting, members of the New Lab tended to have a relatively

high positive attitude towards themselves, and were high in nurturant affiliation at both pre-and posttesting. Like the Continuing Lab, members of the New Lab felt relatively good about themselves and were interested in being with other people. They felt they had the least effective leaders and had originally tended to expect this, as opposed to members of the Therapy Group who had tended to expect and report the most effective leaders.

Microlab: Microlab members wanted and achieved more nurturant goals, but achieved fewer academic-vocational-counseling goals. They wanted and achieved more self-awareness goals, similar to the Therapy Group. Most of these goals were consistent with the kind of group ("sensitivity training") the Microlab was structured and advertised to be, and with the population of members (voluntary students). It was not clear why members of this group were interested in and achieved goals along a nurturant dimension.

In leadership, Microlab members expected and reported more useful experience with the strength-and-distance styles, contrary to members of the Therapy Group. This was consistent with the structure of the group experience, where three leaders set up exercises which were carried out and discussed, mainly in small, leaderless groups.

Microlab members, like the Therapy Group, expected and reported more useful experiences with all methods described. Again, it appeared that this scale was relatively appropriate for a self-development group such as the counseling center therapy groups or this Microlab. Contrary to the Therapy Group, members of the Microlab reported the most satisfaction with their group experience.

CONCLUSION

Interpretable dimensions of a variety of expectations were empirically identified, and members of physically separate and ostensibly different groups were in fact found to differ along the dimensions identified, at the points of testing.

Groups were characterized by member goals, expectations, and perceptions. Lower self-esteem and interest in change, advice, confidentiality, and involvement appropriately characterized therapy groups. Higher self-esteem, interpersonal interest, and disinterest in self-awareness or confidentiality characterized both process groups, consistent with academic self-study and intellectual growth rather than personal change. Microlaboratory members held self-awareness and helping goals, with distant leadership, consistent with small leaderless groups implementing structured exercises. Questionnaires were useful in differentiating groups by member goals, expectations, and perceptions, which appeared to be important factors of group processes and outcomes.

Further attempts are called for to determine the impact of dimensions of expectations on a variety of outcomes, to relate leaders' and members' experience to each other and to goal attainment, and to relate leader and group orientations to outcomes. One of the major practical implications of such research might be a more careful matching of prospective group members with their group experiences, through the knowledge of what expectations and process variables lead to achievement of specific goals.

REFERENCE

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